

Vietnam

Vietnam, a nation located along the eastern coast of mainland Southeast Asia, has had a turbulent history. Emerging as a distinct civilization during the first millennium BC, Vietnam was conquered by China during the early Han dynasty and subjected to 1,000 years of foreign rule. In AD 939 the Vietnamese restored their independence and gradually expanded southward along the coast from their historic homeland in the YUAN RIVER (Red River) valley. In the 19th century Vietnam was conquered once again and absorbed, along with neighboring Cambodia and Laos, into French INDOCHINA. Patriotic elements soon began to organize national resistance to colonial rule, however, and after World War II, Communist-led VIET MINH guerrillas battled for several years to free the country from foreign subjugation.

In 1954, at the GENEVA CONFERENCE, the country was divided into Communist-led North Vietnam and non-Communist South Vietnam. For the next 20 years, both North and South Vietnam were involved in the VIETNAM WAR. That conflict came to an end when Communist forces from the north occupied Saigon (now HO CHI MINH CITY) in April 1975. After the end of the war the Vietnamese government attempted to lead the entire country to socialism. However, economic difficulties and foreign policy problems, compounded by tensions with China over the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, created severe hardship, and Vietnamese leaders are now attempting to guide the country through the transition to a market economy.

LAND AND RESOURCES

Vietnam is shaped like a giant letter S, extending some 1,600 km (1,000 mi) from the Chinese border to Point Ca Mau (Baibung) on the Gulf of Thailand. At its widest it reaches a width of about 560 km (350 mi). In the narrow center it is less than 50 km (30 mi) wide.

Much of Vietnam is rugged and densely forested. A chain of mountains called the Truong Son (Annamese Cordillera) extends more than 1,287 km (800 mi) from the Yuan River delta east of HANOI to the Central Highlands southeast of Laos. For much of that distance these mountains form the border between Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia. The highest point in the country, Fan Si Pan, rises to 3,143 m (10,312 ft) in the mountainous northwest, near the Chinese border. Poor soils and heavy rains make the mountainous areas relatively unsuitable for agriculture.

The large deltas of the Yuan River in the north and the MEKONG RIVER in the south are rich in alluvial basaltic soils brought down from South China and inner Southeast Asia and have abundant water and a favorable climate that make them highly suitable for settled agriculture, particularly the cultivation of wet rice. In the Yuan delta the climate is subtropical, ranging from 5 degrees C (41 degrees F) in winter to more than 38 degrees C (100 degrees F) in summer. The Mekong delta is almost uniformly hot, varying from 26 degrees to 30 degrees C (79 degrees to 85 degrees F) throughout the year. The monsoon season extends from May to October, and typhoons often cause flooding in northern coastal areas.

Most of Vietnam's hardwoods and wild animals (including buffalo, elephants, and rhinoceroses) are found in the mountains. In the north are deposits of iron ore, tin, copper, apatite (phosphate rock), and chromite. Coal, mined along the coast near the Chinese border, is an important export and the main source of energy, although rivers are being harnessed for hydroelectric power and the government is attempting to exploit modest oil reserves in the South China Sea.

PEOPLE

Vietnam is one of the most homogeneous societies in Southeast Asia. Although more than 60 different ethnic groups live in the country, ethnic Vietnamese constitute nearly 90 percent of the total population and are in the majority throughout the country except in the mountains. The Vietnamese are descended from peoples who settled in the Yuan delta area more than 3,000 years ago and later moved southward along the central coast into the Mekong delta. They speak Vietnamese, which exhibits many similarities to other tongues spoken in the region but is sometimes considered a separate language group (see SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES).

The so-called overseas Chinese, descended from ethnic Chinese who migrated into the country during the 17th and 18th centuries, settled for the most part in large cities and became involved in commerce, manufacturing, fishing, and coal mining. During the traditional and colonial periods the Chinese were placed under separate administration. Recent governments, however, have attempted to assimilate them. Thousands of ethnic Chinese fled abroad in 1978 in the wake of a government decision to nationalize commerce and industry in the south; about

2 million reportedly remain in the country.

Tribal peoples, sometimes referred to as MONTAGNARDS, number about 3 million. Descended from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, they live primarily in the Central Highlands and in the mountains of the north, where they practice SLASH-AND-BURN AGRICULTURE. Other smaller groups are the KHMER (about 500,000) and the Cham (about 50,000), remnants of ancient states absorbed by the Vietnamese during their southward expansion.

Although the majority of ethnic Vietnamese traditionally considered themselves Buddhist or Confucianist, there are about 3 million Roman Catholics, most of whom now live in the south. Members of two religious sects, the Cao Dai (an amalgam of Eastern and Western traditions) and the Hoa Hao (a radical form of Buddhism), live mainly in the Mekong delta area and number about 1 million each. Like the ethnic minorities, these religious groups have resisted assimilation into the majority culture and even today are under considerable pressure to conform to the government's socialist ideals.

The vast majority of the population live in overcrowded cities or in the densely populated delta areas and along the central coast. Large southern cities include Ho Chi Minh City, DA NANG, and HUE. Hanoi, the capital, and HAIPHONG, a port on the Gulf of Tonkin (see TONKIN, GULF OF), are the chief cities in the north.

Rapid population growth has placed considerable strain on limited social services and food supplies. The government has instituted a family planning program and attempted to relieve the problem of overcrowding by resettling several million people into "new economic areas" in the sparsely populated mountains and upland plateaus. In 1993 the government asked for UN aid in resettling thousands of recently arrived ethnic Vietnamese refugees from Cambodia.

Education is under state control and is free at all levels. The leading institution of higher learning is Hanoi University. Although health facilities remain limited, there has been significant progress in health care since the reunification of the country in 1976.

For centuries, Vietnamese art and architecture were heavily influenced by Chinese and Indian forms (see SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE). More recently Vietnamese painting borrowed from French styles and techniques. Traditional handicrafts are still practiced, and poetry remains the favorite literary genre. Vietnam's greatest poet was Nguyen Du (1765-1820).

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

According to the evidence of contemporary archaeology, the Vietnamese were one of the first peoples of Asia to master the art of irrigation. Ever since, they have lived off the land, and their primary economic activity has been the cultivation of wet rice. During the period of French rule the marshes of the Mekong delta were drained, leading to a significant increase in rice production. The French also developed coal mining, introduced a number of cash crops, and built a modern rail and road network, but they were determined to maintain their colonies as a market for French manufactured goods and a source of cheap raw materials and did not seriously encourage the development of a modern commercial and industrial sector. After the French departed, economic development in both North and South Vietnam was hindered by the Vietnam War, and the country remained basically preindustrial, dependent on outside aid for essential goods and services.

The ultimate goal of the Communist regime that took power in 1975 was to transform all of Vietnam into an advanced industrial society based on socialist forms of ownership. Industry had been nationalized and agriculture collectivized in the north by the late 1950s, but Communist leaders delayed a similar socialist transformation in the south to avoid alienating the local population and to encourage economic recovery from the long years of war. In 1978, due to the slow pace of postwar economic development and fears of the growth of an unmanageable private sector in the south, government planners announced the nationalization of all industrial and commercial enterprises above the family level and began to create low-level collective organizations in the countryside. The results were disastrous. With much of the population opposed to the new policies the economy went into a rapid decline.

In September 1979 the regime reversed course, permitting the revival of private commerce and postponing the process of collectivization in the south. During the next few years economic production gradually recovered as emphasis shifted from heavy industry to consumer goods and farmers were allowed to sell surplus crops on the free market. The restoration of the small private sector concerned ideological purists within the party leadership, however, who argued for a rapid socialist transformation. In December 1986 the regime adopted a program similar

to that promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR. Profit incentives would be temporarily retained to spur production, but the ultimate objective of eliminating the private sector on a gradual basis was reaffirmed.

The new program enjoyed only modest success, and in 1990 the government granted farmers long-term rights to till private plots. This reform led to a dramatic increase in harvests and the resumption of rice exports. Some hilly areas have recently been planted with cash crops such as coffee, tea, and rubber, and fishing, livestock raising, and forestry are also being encouraged. Sparked by the regime's greater tolerance for private enterprise activities, the industrial sector is showing signs of improvement, particularly in light industry and handicrafts, but consumer goods are in short supply and growth rates continue to be hampered by primitive technology, low export capacity, managerial inexperience, a lack of foreign investment, and shortages of energy, raw materials, and spare parts.

Vietnam's serious balance-of-payments deficit was aggravated in the early 1990s by a decline in remittances from Vietnamese workers in Eastern Europe and the Middle East and the halting of Soviet economic subsidies with the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, but it has substantially improved in recent years because of a rise in exports. Military expenditures have been reduced since Vietnam withdrew its forces from Cambodia in 1989. The regime is now attempting to improve its political and economic relations with China and to attract economic aid and investment from non-Communist countries.

GOVERNMENT

Vietnam today is still a one-party state ruled by the Vietnamese Communist party (VCP), but the political system is now in transition as the result of a new constitution promulgated in April 1992. Although the VCP will continue to be the dominant force in the political system and the only legal party in the country, the unicameral parliament will be transformed from a rubber-stamp for the regime into a true lawmaking body. In elections held in July 1992, more than 80 percent of those elected were new members; 90 percent were members of the VCP. The National Assembly elects the president of the republic, a new post established by the constitution to replace the Council of State, which had functioned as a collective presidency under the 1980 charter.

HISTORY

The Vietnamese people first appear in history as one of several peoples living along the southern coast of China as far south as the Yuan delta. By the middle of the first millennium BC, a small state based on irrigated agriculture and calling itself Van Lang had emerged in the delta. In 101 BC, Van Lang was overrun by forces from the north and gradually absorbed into the expanding Chinese empire. Despite intensive Chinese cultural and political influence, however, the sense of cultural uniqueness did not entirely disappear, and in the 10th century rebel groups drove out the Chinese and restored national independence.

The new state, which styled itself Dai Viet (Greater Viet), accepted a tributary status with China and adopted many political and cultural institutions and values from its northern neighbor. It resisted periodic efforts to restore Chinese rule, however, and began to expand its territory, conquering the state of CHAMPA to the south and eventually seizing the Mekong delta from the declining KHMER EMPIRE.

Expansion brought problems, however. The difficulties of administering a long and narrow empire, and the cultural differences between the traditionalist and densely populated north and the sparsely settled "frontier" region in the Mekong delta, led to political tensions and, in the 17th century, to civil war. Two major aristocratic families, the Trinh and the Nguyen, squabbled for domination over the decrepit Vietnamese monarchy. This internal strife was exacerbated by the arrival of European adventurers who, in order to facilitate their commercial and missionary penetration of Southeast Asia, frequently intervened in local politics.

During the last quarter of the 18th century a peasant rebellion led by the so-called Tay Son brothers in the south spread to the north, where the leading brother, Nguyen Hue, united the country and declared himself emperor. After his death in 1792, this dynasty rapidly declined and was overthrown by a scion of the princely house of Nguyen, who in 1802 founded a new Nguyen dynasty with its capital at Hue.

The Nguyen dynasty had come to power with French assistance, and France hoped for commercial and economic privileges. When these were not granted, the French emperor Napoleon III, under pressure from imperialist and religious groups in France, ordered an attack on Vietnam in 1857. This resulted in a Vietnamese defeat and the ceding of several provinces in the south, which the French transformed into the new colony of COCHIN CHINA. Twenty years later the French completed their conquest of Vietnam, dividing the northern and central parts of the country into protectorates with the historic names TONKIN and ANNAM. Between 1887 and 1893 all three regions

were joined with the protectorates of Laos and Cambodia into the French-dominated Union of Indochina.

French rule had a significant effect on Vietnamese society. Many traditional institutions were dismantled and replaced with others imported from the West. Western technology was introduced, and upper-class Vietnamese increasingly adopted the French language and Roman Catholicism. The economy was oriented toward the export of raw materials, and the small manufacturing and commercial sector was dominated by European and overseas Chinese interests.

Deprived of a political and economic role by the colonial administration, Vietnamese patriots turned to protest or revolt. By the late 1930s the Communist party, led by a Vietnamese revolutionary who took the name HO CHI MINH, had become the leading force in the nationalist movement.

Germany defeated France in 1940. Japan, a German ally, then occupied Vietnam, but the French Vichy Government continued to administer the country until March 1945, when the Japanese established an autonomous state of Vietnam under Annamese emperor BAO DAI. At the POTSDAM CONFERENCE in July-August, the Allies instructed Nationalist Chinese troops in the north and British troops in the south to accept the Japanese surrender. When Japan surrendered in August, however, the Viet Minh, an anti-Japanese and anti-French front founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, seized power. In September, Viet Minh leaders declared the formation of the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

French forces returned by 1946. In March of that year the new government reached a preliminary agreement with France on the formation of a Vietnamese "free state" within the FRENCH UNION, but negotiations collapsed. In December the First Indochinese War broke out between the Vietnamese and the French, who were increasingly supported by the United States. In 1954, after 8 years of fighting, the Vietnamese defeated the French at DIEN BIENT PHU. Soon after, the major powers met at Geneva and called for the departure of all foreign forces and the de facto division of Vietnam at 17 degrees north latitude into two separate cease-fire zones, the Communist-dominated DRV in the north and a non-Communist state in the south, with provision for eventual reunification and elections.

Elections were never held, and the division of Vietnam lasted two decades. In South Vietnam the weak Bao Dai, reinstalled by the French in 1949, was replaced by NGO DINH DIEM. Despite U.S. support, Diem was unable to suppress a continuing guerrilla insurgency directed from Hanoi but provoked in part by his own unpopularity. In November 1963, Diem was overthrown in a military coup, and North Vietnam intensified its efforts to seek reunification under Communist rule.

In 1965, with the South Vietnamese regime on the verge of collapse, the United States decided to send combat troops to South Vietnam to defeat the insurgency, whose various elements had by this time united as the Communist-dominated National Liberation Front of Vietnam (also known as the VIET CONG). But victory was elusive, and U.S. public opinion began to turn against the Vietnam War. After 1968, U.S. president Richard Nixon gradually withdrew U.S. military forces. In January 1973, over the objections of South Vietnam's NGUYEN VAN THIEU (who served as president from 1967 to 1975), a peace agreement was signed in Paris calling for a cease-fire and the total withdrawal of U.S. troops. Vague provisions for a political settlement were ignored, however, and in the spring of 1975 the Communists launched a major offensive in South Vietnam. Southern resistance rapidly collapsed, and North Vietnamese troops occupied Saigon in late April. On July 2, 1976, North and South Vietnam were formally united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The government faced resistance to its socialist economic policies at home and a variety of pressures from abroad. Relations between North Vietnam and China, increasingly tense during the final years of the Vietnam War, reached the breaking point at war's end because of territorial disagreements and a growing rivalry over Cambodia and Laos. In December 1978, Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia, overthrew the pro-Chinese KHMER ROUGE regime, and installed a government sympathetic to Hanoi. Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia in 1989 and normalized relations with China after a UN-supervised Cambodian peace accord was signed in October 1991. In 1992, with Vietnam's economy near collapse due to the cutoff of aid from the former USSR, the United States agreed to provide humanitarian aid in exchange for increased Vietnamese efforts to locate U.S. servicemen listed as missing in action during the Vietnam War. The U.S. trade embargo imposed in 1975 was relaxed in 1993, and in February 1994 the Clinton administration ended the 19-year-old ban on trade.

After reunification in 1976 the Communist party remained the sole political authority in the country. A few months after the death of longtime party chief Le Duan in 1986, the reform-minded Nguyen Van Linh assumed the post. Linh retired in 1991 in favor of party veteran Do Muoi. In 1992 a new constitution was adopted that retained the

concept of one-party rule but added to the powers of the elected legislators and guaranteed the economic freedoms granted since 1986.

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